

# PUBLIC RELATIONS JOURNAL

SEPTEMBER 1957

## IN THIS ISSUE:

The Scared Comedians . . . . . Roy Kammerman

The Power of Social Science Research . . . . . Henry T. Rockwell

Helping Technical Writers . . . . . John F. Budd, Jr.

Do We Know Where We Stand? . . . . . William W. Cook

Why Belong? . . . . . Arthur M. Sargent

## Books in Review:

Public Relations Ideas in Action . . . . . Allen H. Center

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**The Scared**

**Comedians** . . . . . Roy Kammerman 4

A frank look at the future of comedy on television.

**Are We Using the Power of Social**

**Science Research in Public Relations?** . . . Henry T. Rockwell 7

Mr. Rockwell explains the unlimited future of research.

**Helping Technical Writers**

**Unscramble Their Language** . . . . . John F. Budd, Jr. 11

Reducing technical jargon to more understandable terms.

**Do We Really Know**

**Where We Stand?** . . . . . William W. Cook 13

The importance of presenting both sides of any problem.

**Why Belong?** . . . . . Arthur M. Sargent 18

Tangible and less tangible benefits of belonging to Associations.

**Departments:**

**Books in Review** . . . . . 22

# Editorials

## ***What Shall We Do About Madison Avenue?***

● Yes, there must be a Madison avenue. It is said to be a state of mind rather than a place, and there are characteristics of this state of mind that strike some people as being extremely comical.

"Let's anchor that in deep water and see if it sinks . . ."

"Up periscope, fellows, and look around . . ."

"Toss a blanket over that idea and keep it warm, anyway . . ."

If you have never heard anyone talk this way, that doesn't really matter. For we are assured repeatedly, by a wide variety of scribes—especially on dull days when there is not much else to write about—that everybody in the Madison avenue state of mind really does talk this way, just as they all really do wear gray flannel suits.

To the public relations man who is seriously concerned about the reputation of his craft, and concerned also with ways and means of professionalizing it, these rather silly concepts of public relations work become in the end a little disheartening.

In a recent editorial in the *JOURNAL*, it was remarked that the public image of public relations is improving, largely because of the economic pressures which tend to make public relations work more necessary. But this is not inconsistent with the fact that silly and sometimes stupid ideas about public relations men and their work offer little help. ●

## ***Advice to a Young Man***

● The young man writes:

"I want to get into public relations work and I am about to enter college. Just what courses should I take?"

It is a difficult question to answer. One might hope that the young man, upon graduation, would have acquired some of the technical skills he will need. One might hope, for example, that he would know something about typography and layout, something about radio and television techniques, something about photography.

But one might also hope that our young man

would regard these techniques as techniques, and that his real equipment for life in the public relations world would consist of a thorough grounding in the liberal arts. Some of the techniques in public relations can be acquired rapidly in an "on the job" fashion, but the acquisition of good judgment and an awareness of the world takes longer.

This is why it may be hoped that the increasing number of schools and colleges where public relations courses are offered will find it possible, as they develop, to find the right balance between the teaching of individual skills and techniques and the teaching of those classical subjects which have always been of importance to the well-rounded and well-grounded citizen. ●

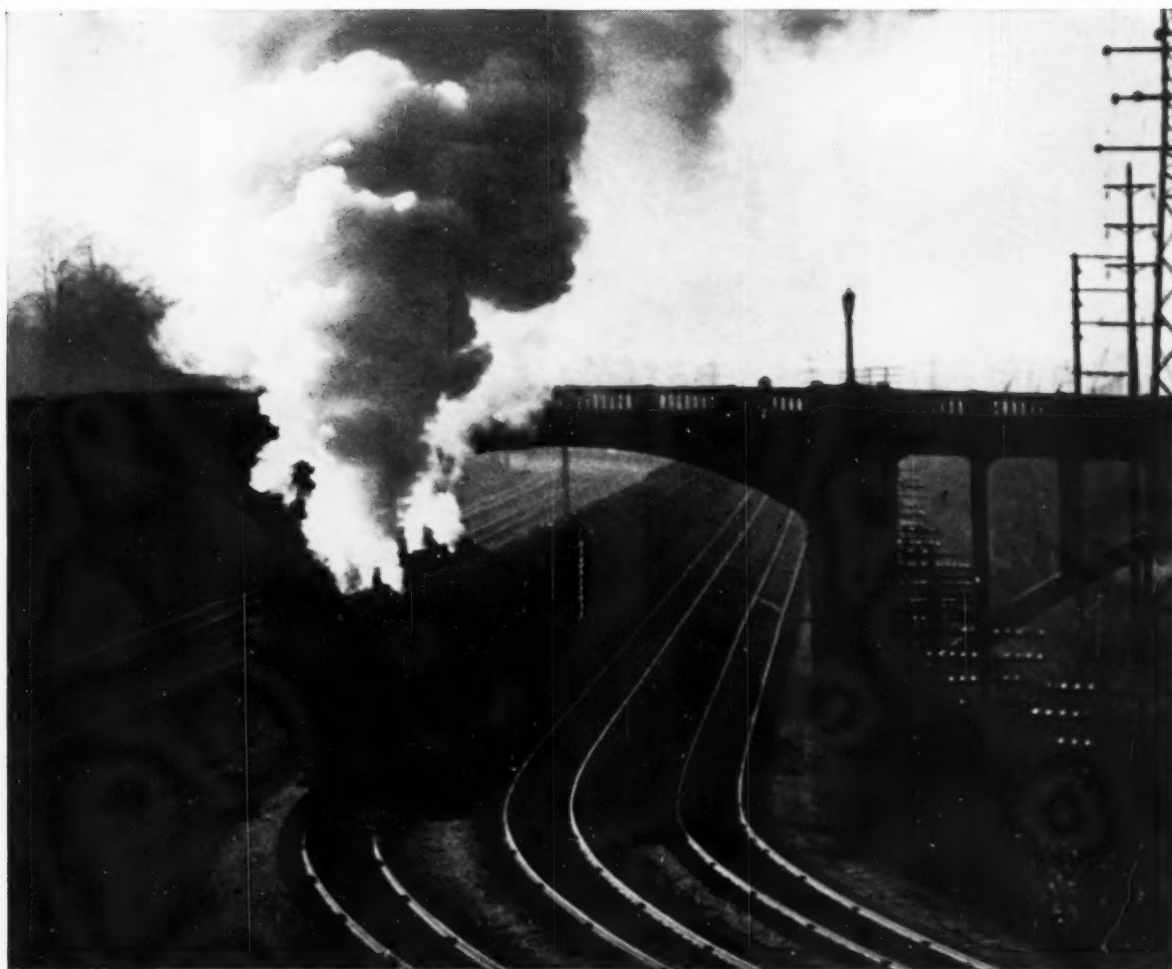
## ***Advocate or Counsel?***

● A correspondent of the *JOURNAL* recently commented that the public relations man, be he in an independent firm or within an industrial company, is inevitably cast in the role of an advocate. It is his job, so the correspondent said, to plead the special case of his employer.

It is possible that this view is widely entertained, but it is also possible that it is entertained in error.

Consider the public relations man who counsels his employer not to do something which the employer would dearly like to do. Is he serving as an advocate? Or, take the public relations man who points out that it would be a mistake for his employer not to grant a certain request of the union. Or, consider the public relations director who, about to write an employee handbook, insists on a research project so that he will know in advance what the employees are interested in knowing. Are such men advocates?

It is possible that identifying public relations work with "advocacy" leads to a kind of semantic confusion. There are certainly times when the public relations man will serve as an advocate, but to stress this idea carelessly can only lead to public confusion as to the expanding role of public relations in an expanding economy. ●



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# The Scared Comedians:

## NO LAUGHING MATTER FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

By Roy Kammerman

● The mass media looms so large in our daily lives, bathed as we are in so much information, pseudo-information and entertainment, that one faces always the temptation to generalize. Generalizations are important. But sometimes the point of a generalization can be sharpened by example. Let me see if I can illustrate with some examples that may be of special interest to those concerned with the flow of information and our "right of access" to available talent.

It was a freezing spring day. An intense, unseasonable cold had cast a

pall over a Shriners' parade. That evening a TV comedian and his writers were searching desperately for a good topical joke to open his show. It was 15 minutes before air time when one of the writers came up with a joke which combined the unseasonable cold with the newsworthy parade.

"It was certainly cold in New York today," the comedian was to remark. "They had a Shriners' parade and it was so cold a 32nd Degree Mason fell 10 degrees."

### A happy ending

A good joke! Everybody breathed a sigh of relief that the frantic session had come to such a happy ending. But it hadn't! The comedian sat silent for a few minutes, busy with deep, uncomedian-like thoughts. "I don't want to do it," he said. "After all, some folks may not like Masons, and the Masons may not like it very much either!"

When President Truman was about to leave the White House and the Republicans were going to take over after 20 years, another comedian was offered this joke: "When Truman leaves the White House, the only income he'll have is a pension he gets as an ex-Army officer. It's only \$90.00 a month, but he ain't worried. He figures that after the Repub-

licans have been in for a while \$90.00 will be really big money!"

This comedian turned the joke down cold. He was afraid it might offend Republicans.

Still another wit refused to ask a young couple how many children they would like. He was a good Catholic, and he felt he might offend other Catholics with a question which would imply that people might control the number of their offspring.

What has happened that comedians—historically privileged to be the most irreverent people in the kingdom—have come to such small measure? Will Rogers said, "We have the best Congress money can buy" (an almost treasonous utterance by today's standards) and retained the respect—yea, even love—of the entire Nation. Fred Allen actually did the 32nd Degree Mason joke, and if he lost the Mason audience (or the anti-Mason audience) it never showed up in his ratings.

### Afraid of losing audiences

The easy answer is that the comedians are afraid of losing their tremendous audiences and thereby their tremendous salaries; but this is an effect, not a cause. Why do they feel that a single joke, or even a series of jokes, could lose them any part of their audience? The answer

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● One of the problems of a mass medium, especially one that is sensitive to advertising pressures or "group" pressures, is the pervasive fear that it may "offend." Television seems to have been especially susceptible to this fear, certainly more so than, say, the daily press. In the present article, Mr. Kammerman suggests that normal caution can sometimes be carried to the extremes of absurdity, with a consequent temptation toward the protection of mediocrity and convention. The author's article is concerned primarily with the state of television comedy and humor, but it has wider implications.

lies, it would seem, in the fact that they have been "conditioned" to an unreasoning fear by some advertising agency executives who have for years been functioning as amateur public relations counsels.

When I hear my friends tell me that advertising agencies are now adding "public relation departments" to offer their clients an "integrated service," I am reminded of a sketch by Henry Morgan. Henry, a man with surpassing satiric talents, by the way, played the part of an inventor who was seeking a new type of glue. On the way to the glue, he accidentally invented the phonograph, television, electricity and penicillin, but went blindly on in his search for a new glue.

Ad agency executives, in their search for the perfect program, i.e., one which every man, woman and child in America will watch without even a break during the commercial, have been practicing public relations for years. Perhaps "practicing" is the right word. The public relations of the networks and of the performers have inadvertently been shaped by these agency executives (often minor ones at that) who have had major public relations responsibilities thrust upon them without even basic training in the art.

The extent is ascertainable.

### Three-minute commercials

A standard half-hour TV show has a three-minute commercial. Presumably, the three-minute commercial alone should be the concern of the agencies, but agencies are concerned with the impact of the *whole* program upon the public in the strictest public relations sense. To see this principle in operation in its simplest form you have only to watch a quiz show the next time a man in uniform appears as a contestant. An unwritten law demands that he go away "loaded." This is a public relations—not an advertising—gesture.

All advertising people suspect that a program's mood and content tend to represent the company itself to the public with more lasting impact than the commercial message does. In some cases, the public relations impact is deemed so great that the ad-

vertisement is dispensed with. The Metropolitan Opera broadcasts have for years rejoiced in a simple announcement that so and so was sponsoring them. Cities Service Oil Company has spent millions to bring good music to a small but devoted audience. When Edward R. Murrow's sponsor says on occasion something like, "This program is so important that we won't interrupt it with a commercial" the sponsor is perhaps right in thinking that the public will respond by thinking, "Isn't it lovely of that company to give up their valuable commercial," and be more apt than ever to look favorably upon their wares . . . or policies!

### Controversial programs

A major company recently gave up completely the middle commercial on a controversial series so that whatever mud was being flung at the height of the verbal exchanges wouldn't somehow rub off on the product. Since controversial programs always antagonize someone, they were afraid that the antagonism might be shifted to the product were it introduced in the middle of the discussion.

These undoubtedly sound decisions are usually made at high level, in consultation with public relations people. Indeed, many top-level decisions in television have resulted in its becoming far more adult and less constricted than radio ever was, in my opinion. But these decisions constitute the *minority* of public relations decisions indulged in by the TV industry. Most of the decisions are made in the heat of a race towards a TV deadline—by ad executives who have the narrow lapels but lack the broad vision of the public relations practitioner.

A big soap company for years presented a weekly comedy hour. On one such show, 15 minutes before air, the agency representative discovered that the comedian was going to open the show with a monolog about doctors. It was a moment of horror . . . the company sold to doctors . . . if the monolog were delivered, sensitive doctors might boycott the product and this company . . . one of the great

trusts of the world . . . might be delivered into the hands of the sheriff.

"Change the monolog," he thundered, but this is easier ordered than done on 10 minutes notice so the sweating comedian delivered the monolog and it was a sound flop, although it contained the funniest material in his repertoire. When it was delivered later on another network, the network received requests from such medical strongholds as Johns Hopkins asking for copies for use in their own entertainments.

### Hundreds of examples

Anyone in TV can give you hundreds of examples. The star of a quiz show invited the Senior Class of his high school to his show, and asked them to select two representatives to be contestants. They chose a white girl and a colored boy, who was also *class president*—this choice being made in view of 300 other spectators. An advertising executive had to make a frantic public relations decision. The Sponsor was a Southern Company and the Ad Exec felt that putting a white person and a Negro on the show at the same time might offend someone. He had a minute to make a decision and he made it: don't put the Negro boy on . . . invent an excuse however flimsy and put someone in his stead. It was a wild chance to take and could have resulted in some interesting public relations if the truth had ever leaked out.

### Concerned with content

Agency people's concern with the content of the program as well as the commercial material is one of the real harassments of the creative staff. When Lucille Ball had her famous baby, a star working for a cigarette company had a joke in the script about it. He was forbidden to use the joke or even congratulate Lucy because Lucy was sponsored by Philip Morris and the ad man felt a mention of Lucy's baby might start the audience thinking about Philip Morris instead of his cigarette. Good commercialism—but surely cheap.

The net effect of this excessive cau-

*Continued on Following Page*

tion is to cause performers to weigh their words to the point of absurdity. "Suppose doctors *do* object to doctor jokes," the comedian tells himself. "Then maybe lawyers object to lawyer jokes and farmers to farmer jokes." The comedian, emulating the amateur public relations man, keeps narrowing his choice of material. Soon, God wot, if the retreat continues, we may be forced to relinquish the legend that all band leaders are drunks. *Après that, rien!*

### Unions and the American Legion

Certain organized groups have always been sacrosanct. Unions, a ripe subject for humor if there ever were one, are studiously avoided lest the joke be labeled anti-union. And who dares spoof that most un-humorous of bodies, the American Legion, although individually its members delight in jokes about their misadventures when they were in the services?

I sometimes feel that organized groups, sensing the timidity of TV's public relations policies, get drunk with power. Recently a network is reported by John Crosby to have received a protest from the Bar Association, objecting to a *joke* some one told which represented some lawyers to be crooked. If whoever registered that protest wasn't drunk with power, he was drunk with something.

Whether this protest will result in any edicts from on high I doubt, but unquestionably there will come a moment when a comedian will be asked to purge a remark about lawyers be-

cause, "Well, we sell a lot of paper clips to lawyers and they might object to being called high priced and next thing you know they'll be holding their briefs together with straight pins."

It is no exaggeration to say that self-imposed restrictions are growing so strict that soon all comedians will be able to talk about will be themselves. That's why, when a performer like Elvis or Liberace is sufficiently bizarre to register sharply on the public's consciousness, comedians attack in force like wolves who have discovered a carcass.

### Long-range survivors

It may not be significant, but the two notable and long-range survivors of the comic debacle are Jack Benny and Bob Hope. Benny's career is based on making jokes about himself. Hope's stock in trade is Crosby's money and age, and the universal appeal of the convex curve. Actually, however, Hope must also be given credit in more long-term daring in topical jokes than any other comedian. If my memory serves me, he is one of the few who dared to tell a joke about the late Senator McCarthy when the Senator was at his height of power.

What is the net result of trying to please everybody? It is disaster in terms that even ad agency people understand . . . comedians are losing their shows. They offend nobody, but bore everybody. The demise of the comedians, of course, is blamed on other things.

### "Writer shortage"

"TV burns up material so fast" you hear. Actually TV burns up material no faster than radio. "You can't get good comedy writers," is another plaintive cry, but the truth is that competent comedy writers languish without jobs at the height of the so-called "writer shortage" and that new writers, at all times, find it a virtually closed field.

Comedy does not lack so much for material: it lacks for *subjects* for humor because it is constantly cutting itself off from all proper sources. All that is left is the intramural joke and

the endless situation comedies about the limitless stupidity of the American male. The comedians have, for the moment at least, vanished.

Appeasement, in the field of comedy, has reaped the same rewards it reaps in politics . . . oblivion!

### Armed with public relations edicts

In contrast, what of the few performers who did not come trembling to the microphones armed with their mousy public relations edicts? Godfrey, who has enthusiastically violated the sacred dicta of the ad moguls, is still a towering TV personality. There has been much chop-licking talk about Mr. Godfrey's falling ratings, yet even after the firings and the tower-buzzings, Mr. Godfrey had not one but *two* shows in the top 20 and was, in addition, one of the biggest personalities on daytime TV. At least a hundred million dollars and the efforts of the most talented show people in our time have been spent on programs which have failed to achieve the rating which Arthur's Talent Scouts enjoys even today. Godfrey stands as a triumph, not of blue material, but of personality and showmanship and judgment . . . over the boys who have to make the "pot luck" public relations decisions.

### Strength and stature

Sinatra has boldly taken on all the bogey-men of TV and defeated them all, gaining both strength and stature in the battle and is currently a "hot" TV property worth a dozen more pliable performers. Presley, whose bumps TV sought to regulate, just signed the allegedly most lucrative contract in movie history. Ingrid Bergman deserves mention in this group. While Miss Bergman is not a TV actress, she was accorded the full TV treatment by being judged not morally fit to appear in our living rooms at 8:00 on a Sunday night. This was the result of an attempt to keep public relations intact by polling viewers for their opinion on Miss Bergman's moral right to appear. That she subsequently won an Academy Award, and that no boycott of the movie industry ensued, proves

*Continued on Page 24*

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• ROY KAMMERMAN was once an insurance salesman, and a successful one. But after World War II, he decided to exchange the emotional satisfactions of selling for the emotional satisfactions of writing. Since that time he has been a successful writer of radio and television material and his work has been heard or "viewed" by a good many millions. He has also served as a consultant to public relations and advertising firms. Married, with three children, he lives in Port Chester, New York.



# Are We Using The Power of Social Science Research In Public Relations?

By Henry T. Rockwell

● Are we in public relations fully utilizing the valuable services of the social scientist? I think not. At least nowhere near as much as we could do so profitably and for the benefit of our own thinking in guiding the programs and policies of our companies and clients. However, social science research *has* been widely exploited in the fields of marketing, packaging and advertising.

While opinions may vary as to its soundness and effectiveness—and the weight which should be given to its conclusions—nevertheless it has been a vital factor in determining the direction and selection of many successful marketing programs. Why hasn't the public relations man used more of this research? In my opinion, imagined high costs, a lack of understanding of techniques and methods and their application to specific problems, plus in

many cases, an inability or unwillingness to sell management on the dollar value of such research—have been major deterrents.

## Reasons behind human behavior

There is no more powerful force which could be put in the hands of the astute public relations man than the type of research which will reveal the reasons behind human behaviour. The application of this knowledge could be absolutely priceless, for instance, in terms of uncovering attitudes toward and reactions to a company's or industry's policies, actions and management—on the part of all publics: stockholders, distributors, customers, employees, government and community. But, few executives use it to their advantage—decisions are still being made by "hunch" or "past experience" which may be highly prejudiced and influenced by relatively unimportant factors. Since top management rarely appreciates and seldom understands the function of social science research, it is up to the public relations man to interpret its use and value. Furthermore, he must be able to explain the dollar value of this research to a board of directors.

This is tough enough, but on top of it all, the public relations man faces the confusion of terminology and methodology and a lot of name calling, knifing and bitterness among the scientists themselves. Fortunately, if the public relations man is smart he will not try to determine or dic-

tate methods when he chooses social science research. Social science research techniques must be tailored to fit the problem, rather than to fit a technique favored by any group of adherents to a particular method. That is why, again, the public relations man should first see a sort of social science "diagnostician" (unbiased enough to help select the proper approach to the problem).

## Two main "camps"

There are two main "camps" in the social science research world at present. One is generally referred to as the quantitative analysis approach. This involves large numbers—for the statistical techniques of sampling, analyzing and measuring. The other "camp" is most often regarded as employing motivation research techniques. This normally does not involve large numbers of people, but rather stresses interviewing of carefully screened, selected audiences, using depth psychological probing to uncover hidden motives for behaviour. There are many combinations and variations of both approaches to any problem. But, whether purposely or not, advocates of the two principal methods have been at war publicly.

## "Pseudo-scientists"

The psychologists have pretty much sat on the sidelines, watching the fight, while the quantitative boys have "condemned" the motivational research men as being "pseudo-scientists." Ac-

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● In college Mr. Rockwell majored in psychology and business administration, and throughout a 20-year newspaper, copywriting, contact and radio career he has utilized this educational background.

During the war he censored radio and cable press traffic in and out of the country. He has authored many articles for trade and consumer publications and now heads Jones & Brakeley, an agency and consulting firm which devotes a majority of its talents to general and industrial public relations activities.

tually, the unbiased observer will tell you that there is no conflict between these two approaches. In fact, they are interdependent. Both use many common psychological techniques. But great skill and experience in methodology is required to integrate them properly. And, just as in public relations, not all social science practitioners are equally capable, so the current situation is "let the buyer beware." In fact, one practitioner remarked that social science research is about at the stage public relations was fifteen years ago.

#### **Leave techniques to technicians**

But, let's leave techniques to the technicians. Why be confused with trying to fully understand such methods of social science research as, association tests, unconscious level testing, stratified multi-stage area, probability sampling, statistical analysis, and depth interviewing. The principal problem is, as one questioner put it at a recent conference on this subject, "*How can we make management executives aware of needs for this kind of approach and appraisal? How can we get them to want it and spend money for such 'non-cash register work' which is expensive?*"

#### **Motivation research**

For one thing, I believe we may be guilty of thinking social science research expensive. Certainly, large scale market research projects can be. But, there are many types of psychological research which can get the facts without expenditures of large sums. Take for instance the man who wanted to find out why people "angel" Broadway productions. For his own personal reasons, he retained practitioners using motivation research techniques to interview eighteen "angels" to ascertain "why" those who do finance the American theater (*Saturday Review*, Feb. 23, 1957). The cost of this study was relatively little. His objective: to find out more about how "angels can become a real asset to the American theater." Likewise, there are many psychological studies on a limited or very small scale which could be made in busi-

ness, and I mention some of them later on.

#### **Pitfall to avoid**

However, a pitfall which must be avoided in any research is to make sure research is not being made just for the sake of "window dressing" or to prove a "pet" public relations theory. What is vital to the practical success of social science studies is that they be interpreted and be directed for the solution of a business or management problem. An interesting case which was revealed to me may be cited to illustrate my thought. Not long ago a noted psychologist made a thorough study and analysis on why people chew gum. It was undertaken for a prominent manufacturer. It was an outstanding and exhaustive study. It revealed just why people chewed, including all their underlying motivations. But the study neglected to tell the manufacturer how he could use this information to sell more of *his* brand of gum. As this latter was the sole purpose for authorizing the research, the report was in that respect valueless. The ultimate objective must be to keep in mind constantly that social science research must be conducted within the framework of management problem solving.

#### **Advantages of research**

Perhaps if this goal were more apparent, it would be easier to sell top executives on the advantages of social science research. Management has criticized this research as being inconclusive, or not exact. While this is untrue, it must be remembered that when you're dealing with human beings, not mass production machinery or chemical formulae, they can be unpredictable, reacting differently under different stimuli. For example, a person may answer the same question two or three different ways under different circumstances. Words are frail instruments of communication possessing different meanings and semantic overtones for different people—and changing in their attributes over time.

In spite of a general recognition of the importance of psychological fac-

tors in many practical situations, many attempts to apply the methods of social science to the problems of business and industry have failed to achieve what management thinks is a profitable result because the unconscious habits, purposes, needs and motives that determine human behaviours have not been fully taken into account.

#### **"Scientific" surveying**

One example of this "misfire" might be cited in the erroneous results which could be obtained by so-called "scientific" surveying . . . but which lack psychological and motivational interpretation. Here's how such "false" results can be obtained. When a number of selected people were asked if they ever borrowed money from a loan company—all answered with a positive "no." Yet, when their names were checked back against the records of a local loan company, it was found that at one time or another, *all* had borrowed. It is obvious that the persons did not want to admit this truth.

#### **Human behaviour**

A prominent psychologist recently said "no matter how effective we become in motivation analysis, we'll never be in a position to control human behaviour." But, human conviction, misconceptions and resistances are so complex and based on so many varied influences, that to properly guide a public relations program, or advise management intelligently, it is essential to call on the assistance of the social scientist. Too many decisions today are based on personal conviction, "what the trade" says, "what the man on the street" says. These are all vague "sets of feelings" and usually the person with the most persuasive case determines the course of company policy—and he is not necessarily right.

Where can social science research be used in public relations? Here are a few of a score or more. Moving into a new plant location should call for social studies of the new area. But, in the main, management looks at

*Continued on Page 10*

# Do people read public relations advertising?



They certainly read this advertisement for Charles Pfizer & Co. in The New York Times Magazine on September 2, 1956.

The two-page, full-color spread tells in fact-filled copy the story of fermentation chemistry and antibiotics. It describes Pfizer's work in the field as the world's leading producer of antibiotics. New York Times readers were invited to write for a booklet, "Our Smallest Servants."

Result? Despite the Labor Day weekend publication date, more than 5,000 New York Times readers wrote for the booklet *within a week*. By the end of two weeks, the count was over 10,000; at the end of September, some 15,000.

This interested, almost instantaneous response has special meaning for you. It shows, strikingly, the attention readers bring to advertising in The New York Times. Because they are curious, seeking facts and information, your advertising is seen and read when they are observant, alert.

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only Chamber of Commerce facts and figures. After being assured of a welcome, a company may discover his new million dollar plant is in hostile territory — too late. Acquisitions always lead to difficult situations. Why doesn't management authorize more depth interviewing, from time to time, to see how they're doing with their new employees and, more importantly, newly acquired managements! They might put their finger on the reasons for low efficiency, loss of incentive. Rarely, and then too late, do the real reasons for lower management echelon discontent come to the attention of new owners.

How many companies run depth attitude surveys among their dealers and distributors? In most cases, a manufacturer's attitude is "we don't have to know how they feel—if the price is right, they take our stuff." But, is this true? Of course, many manufacturers actually don't care what is thought of them as a company, *if* the business continues to roll in. When it doesn't, it's too late. It may be too late to find the hidden reason why. The "exit interview"—that comes when the man you've fired gets his pink slip. How many companies realize its importance? How many use psychological interviews to find out what's bad or good about their company in the eyes of the separatee? Does management say to you — as a public relations man — what do we care what those guys

think? Then, it's up to you to prove that it is important to your company's or your client's welfare if he wants to stay in business and make money. Harsh things spoken about your company can have serious consequences. However, it's a science to get the truth in an "exit interview."

#### Community attitude studies

Another place where research can be used is in community attitude studies. Frequently they turn up surprising findings, and should be conducted at regular intervals. An interesting example is where a company plant, responsible for a considerable dust problem in a community, thought they could counteract the protests of neighbors simply by substantially increasing their donation to the Community Chest. The negative attitude toward the industry, however, continued, and the survey indicated other steps had to be taken. There ought to be continuous consumer attitude studies by every company that depends in any way on public acceptance or loyalty.

#### Occasional analysis

The occasional analysis will show a trend that could conceivably warn of disaster, in time to avert it, or keep company's policies on the most profitable track. These need not be large-scale quantity samples. With industry scrambling for scientific brains, what companies have tried to uncover the

motivating factors which decide the employee's selection? Is it the plant by the swimming pool, or "cradle-to-grave-security," a few dollars more in the pay envelope, an opportunity to work on the first inter-stellar spaceship, or what? Psychological interviewing might turn up some interesting, hidden facts that don't appear on the form sheet that asks "what influenced you to select our company?" Maybe a lot of smaller companies, who think they're out of the race with the big boys, have a more potent appeal—if they knew how to use it. Social science research, *employed for management-solving purposes*, should provide the answers.

At a recent PRSA luncheon in New York, a psychiatrist was asked, "What is the significance of all the new toothpaste names?" He replied that it probably had its basis in the sex craze sweeping the country. This is an interesting observation. Did the drug manufacturers consciously have this in mind when the names were "tested"? Do they now realize the unconscious connotation? If it is true, does the public want sex in its toothpaste? Let's do more scientific research—of the more solid type—on names *before* they are tested in market surveys, and so-called public opinion polls. Names of products, companies, services—all may be regarded as dangerous until proved useful, catchy and helpful — for the

*Continued on Page 22*



# Helping Technical Writers Unscramble Their Language

By John F. Budd, Jr.

● The age of automation, of electronics and the atom, has spawned a new generation of journalists — the technical writers.

Since the rapid and voluminous exchange of information is a prime characteristic of our highly dynamic industrial society, theirs is a sensitive and important role. Unfortunately for the art of communication, too many of these writers feel compelled to take refuge in over-precise, cliché-loaded technical jargon when interpreting some new aspect of the technology that is going on all around us.

## Information in attractive form

No group has as much important information to convey to people as the engineers and scientists. The job of the technical writer is to cast that information in the most understandable and attractive form.

Today's public relations man can add new dimensions to his usefulness by bringing his objectivity and professional writing skill to bear upon this field.

The corporate personality of most companies today hinges, among other things, on two basic factors: its technical proficiency and skill in management and its success in seeing to it that the outside world becomes aware of it.

While considerable emphasis and imagination are devoted to developing and nurturing a wide variety of public relations skills, the area of technical communication is still pretty much considered a sort of special little world

where dwell the "brains" and their atomic-age Boswells, the technical writers. The net result is a sort of Cliché Curtain between the technical attainments of many companies and the average folk who also are the investors and customers.

## Post-war phenomenon

Technical writing as a profession is almost as much a post-war phenomenon as Salk vaccine and the peacetime reactor. During the war scientists were much too hard-pressed to set down their accomplishments or describe their developments by pen or typewriter—and few had the inclination or the ability to do it. But someone had to write the "how-to" booklets, for example, for the electronic gear and other complex gadgets used by the military. Into this breach stepped a new breed of wordsmiths, the technical writers. Some had formal or professional training, but in the main they were just people with a background in science and an interest in writing. Their contribution has been one of the many little-recognized accomplishments of the war.

When it was all over, they found a ready market for their unique skills in industry—already awakened to the advantages and necessity of reporting its scientific and engineering progress in an increasingly competitive economy.

Paradoxically, many a businessman who deplores governmental gobbledygook fails to realize that the industrial versions of the same can be just as irritating and wasteful. Every year industrialists spend thousands of dollars

in support of legions of technical writers, assuming without question that the copy they turn out faithfully transmits technical ideas and believably translates the labors of their engineers and scientists. Such is not always the case. Too often the three R's of technical writing seem to be: Redundancy, Rhetoric and Repetition.

To understand why this is so, you must first try and understand the technical mind.

## Language highly specialized

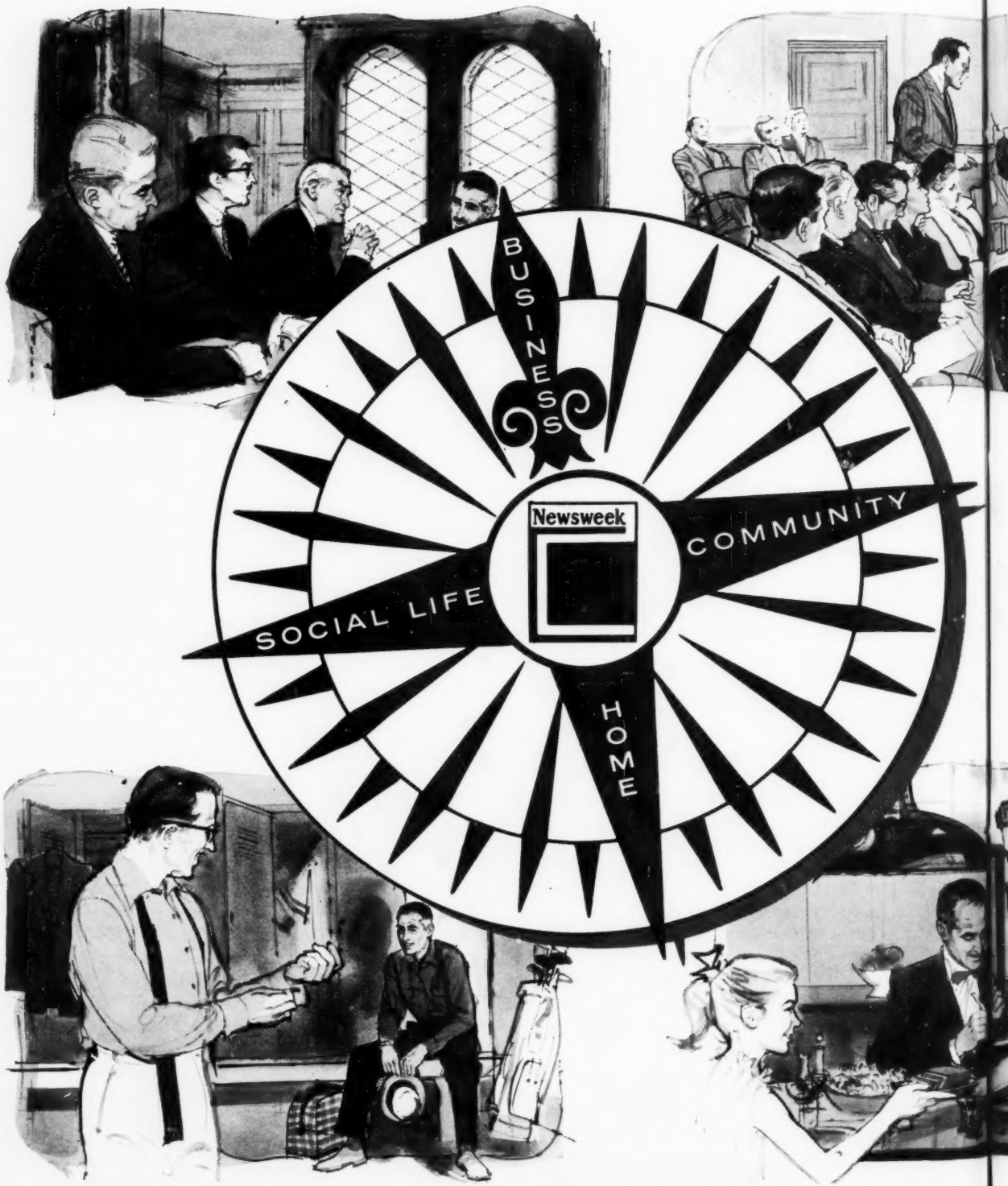
Engineers and scientists talk mostly with other engineers and scientists. As a result, their language becomes highly specialized. In fact, in some cases it becomes so departmentalized that an industrial engineer may have a difficult time talking to and understanding a chemical engineer.

This specialized language has been developed for the very practical purpose of speeding communication between each other in an involved technology—in a sense, it's a sort of technological shorthand. Since most engineers do not necessarily have to explain themselves to laymen, they don't bother to translate their knowledge. Further, as contrasted to doctors and lawyers who deal constantly with the lay public, they do not have the daily experience of needing to get their ideas across in lay language.

Into this environment steps the technical writer. It is important for the engineer to have confidence in the writer's presentation of his work as authoritative. Any technical writer

*Continued on Page 14*

# com·mu'ni·cat



# ative people\*

## ...why they mean so much to every marketer of products, services and ideas

**A**N increasingly vital element of marketing—in fact, of the whole economy — is communications. And the most essential element of the nation's communications structure consists of people who are themselves unusually communicative.

\*These are the people with a dynamic quality for influencing the opinions and actions of others throughout their business, home, social and community lives.

Communicative people are not necessarily highly vocal, nor necessarily distinguished by title, social position or economic standing. But these rewards do seem to come to those who possess the *communicative* faculty—and they exercise their influence at the conference table, on the 5:15, at the nineteenth hole or on their school boards.

Communicative people contribute substantially to the opinion-forming needs of their associates and neighbors because they keep themselves exceptionally well-informed.

It is for such people that **NEWSWEEK** Magazine is edited.

For **NEWSWEEK** reports the news of government, diplomacy, the arts and sciences, as well as business—from *every* area of interest—clearly, completely, and objectively. And equally important, **NEWSWEEK** appraises the likely outcome—the news significance.

### The Recognition Is Impressive

It is significant that **NEWSWEEK** is read by the highest concentration of executives and high-income families among all magazines of one million or greater circulation.

Even more significant, perhaps, is the fact that in 1956 **NEWSWEEK** led all magazines in advertising pages run in the 50 largest corporate campaigns. Highly indicative, because corporate campaigns by their nature are addressed to the opinion leaders of America—to communicative people who spark the chain reaction culminating in public opinion.

## Newsweek...

*the magazine for  
com·mu'ni-ca'tive people*



worth his pay makes a meticulous effort to establish this rapport. However, such honest endeavor is invariably a trap—the writer loses his objectivity and unconsciously or not, begins to evaluate his writing in terms of the engineer's own critical public—i.e. other engineers.

It is here that perspective goes awry. The technical writer, who may have had only high school or college physics, accepts as gospel the scientist's or engineer's over-estimate of the reader.

Just what causes an engineer to tend to indulge in phrases like "at an elevated temperature" (instead of just plain "hot"), and cleave so stuffily to the impersonal mood and passive voice ("consideration must be given to" instead of "you must consider") has never been explained positively. In all fairness, though, we should recognize that to a large extent the roundabout locutions found in engineering "write-up" stem from the understandable reluctance of a person with the trained-scientist viewpoint to make a flat statement about anything that might turn out to be less than 100 per cent true under some special condition, even though that condition is unforeseeable.

### **Simplify and dramatize**

Granting that engineers have some excuse for writing as they do does not remove the need for having their news "translated" into more forthright, man-in-the-street terms. It's the job of the good technical writer to do that: To simplify—even dramatize, a bit—without doing violence to the

basic, honest conservatism of the engineering (scientific) mind.

Much of today's technical writing is characterized by stilted, over-stuffed phrases like "the switch is used to initiate or terminate the pumping action," instead of "it starts or stops the pump," and "the situation here dictates the utilization of . . ." rather than "here you must use" or "this method permits operating economies in the amount of horsepower used to fulfill the demand," a pompous way of saying "this method requires less horsepower."

The style book for McGraw-Hill's highly technical journal, *Control Engineering*, cautions its technical scribes: "In all writing—no matter where or for whom—you must try to convey information clearly and painlessly. Don't ask the reader to approach the sentence as he would a knotty puzzle . . . most engineering writing needs a leavening of simple declarative sentences, shorn of excess verbiage."

Philip Klass, the capable avionics editor of *Aviation Week*, focuses his attention on the technical talks, "... one of the brutal forms of torture devised by civilized man." He points out that no self-respecting engineer would turn out a communications system that had "such poor information transmission capabilities."

### **Rules of good writing**

Basically, the rules of good writing are the same regardless of whether a corporate expansion or a new product development is involved. Any story should be told clearly and in the fewest possible words. The public relations man can make a substantial contribution by counseling and coaching his firm's technical writers into the habit of "translating" their material into concise form; the way a good reporter does in covering a speech, a fire, a political story.

The standards of accuracy and integrity of reporting and of directness and persuasiveness in writing, have to be at least as high in technical copy as in newspaper reporting or magazine writing.

Recently, at least one firm has launched a counterattack against " cliché-loaded technical jargon." Min-

neapolis - Honeywell, generally regarded as one of the world's leading automatic control makers and thus deeply steeped in engineering, has embarked on a program for good, clear English. It states its platform in a compact handbook published for its technical writers and forthrightly entitled, "Why Not Just TELL Them?"

### **Need for booklet**

The introduction presents this argument on the need for such a booklet:

"In this booklet we're not going to try and tell you how to write. You already know how or you wouldn't be where you are. But—everything's changing rapidly nowadays and, unless our writing technique keeps pace, a lot of printed matter is going to get tossed unread into waste baskets. This is especially true of technical writing

... "Don't get the idea that this booklet is intended to bring you up to date on the latest technical jargon. Quite the opposite! It hopes to encourage you to steer clear of both technical jargon and 'engineeringese,' a pompous style of writing that's usually roundabout or timid in stating a general conclusion."

### **Skill and imagination**

Recognizing that everyone feels today that he hasn't the time to read all of the things he ought to read, the booklet asks its writers to "fight for the reader's attention" with skill, economy and imagination. It suggests (as every public relations man should suggest to his firm or client) trying to capture the interest of these busy men at the very beginning, and holding this interest by telling the story clearly and concisely, without wandering or indulging in unnecessary editorial observations.

The M-H booklet, which was written by E. A. Murphy, editor of one of the firm's external technical publications, in collaboration with John Stahr of Carl Byoir & Associates, New York, outlines down-to-earth tips on how to sharpen and polish technical writing. These are found under such headings as "Overstuffed Sentences,"

*Continued on Page 23*

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• As an account executive for Minneapolis-Honeywell's Industrial Division, on behalf of Carl Byoir & Assoc., JOHN F. BUDD, JR., spent five years dealing with engineers, scientists and reams of technical copy. Currently, he is eastern account supervisor of the M-H account also handling the firm's wholly-owned subsidiary, Datamatic Corp. He wrote the first *Automation Dictionary*, which translated engineering terms into familiar language. Nearly 50,000 copies were distributed by request.



# DO WE REALLY KNOW WHERE WE STAND?

By William W. Cook

● Public relations literature abounds in proof that management has grown more enlightened about the need to divulge facts which once were carefully hidden from public view.

Airlines, which used to throw cordons around crash sites to bar reporters and photographers, now set up field headquarters and mobile kitchens to feed the press not only palatable coffee and doughnuts, but also some highly unpalatable facts.

For this achievement public relations can—and does—take a deserved bow. But while we're acknowledging our plaudits, maybe we should look at the reverse side of the medal and pose a somewhat embarrassing question: Have we been as persistent as we should in keeping the other side of our famous two-way street free from roadblocks? In short, are we continuing to do all that is needed to determine the facts, palatable or unpalat-

able, about what people think of our companies and interpret them frankly to management?

In many cases the answer obviously is yes. In others, a close look reveals some distressing signs.

## Where companies stand

No public relations counselor can be in business long without learning that a surprising number of managements don't really know where their companies stand in public opinion. From the standpoint of actual knowledge about attitudes, some public relations programs are conducted in a vacuum into which seep only a few relatively unavoidable facts. Often this awareness is limited to the views of a few special publics, such as unionized employees and customers, whose day-to-day actions provide a sort of running index of their opinions of a company's policies, actions or products.

The results of assuming that "no news is good news" are, of course, frequently reflected in crash programs in public relations. These are launched when management suddenly realizes that certain people not only don't like the way the company is treating them, but actually are doing something about it which is hurting business.

An example is the recent case of a large company which barely avoided, by last-minute action, being forced to move out of a community in which it had operated for half a century on the assumption that public sentiment was strongly behind it.

## Chemical company program

The company produces chemicals, one by-product of which is a great quantity of saline waste. New city zoning regulations threatened to prevent the building of new waste beds, thus jeopardizing continued operation in that area. Belatedly, the company decided to launch a public relations program to inform the town of the need for new waste beds, their harmlessness, the company's plans to landscape present and future beds, and to point out the probable effects on the city's economy if the plant had to move.

The public relations firm brought in to do the job undertook a comprehensive survey of community opinion as a first step. Representatives of virtually every segment of the city's business, political and social life were interviewed—cab drivers, housewives, employees, city and county officials, among others.

## Little regard for people

Significantly, the study showed that the sentiments of the townspeople, including the company's own employees, went far deeper than mere opposition to new waste beds. Folks simply didn't like the company. They felt that it had operated for decades with little if any regard for their interests.

It didn't take long to see that the company was in the familiar position of fighting a fire that was about to burn down the house. Nevertheless it

*Continued on Page 16*



Mr. Cook

# Do We Really Know Where We Stand?

*Continued from page 15*

developed a two-pronged attack on the problem. One prong was a crash program to bring about a reversal of local regulations which would have forced the company to move. Simultaneously, a basic program of employee and community relations was launched to identify the company's interests with those of its own people and the community. Fortunately both programs succeeded, and the company today enjoys cordial relations with its workers and fellow townspeople.

## **Lack of information**

Any of several causes may lie behind the lack of information typified by this company's quandary before it got matters in hand. Often it's a case where an able and conscientious public relations man, aware of his duty and determined to do it, has banged his head against a wall of apathy or incomprehension so often he's groggy.

In still other cases, it appears to stem from the kind of thinking exemplified by Satchel Paige's maxim: "Never look behind; somep'n might be gainin' on ya."

Like a man who's too afraid he has

cancer to see a doctor, some public relations people hesitate to learn the true extent of their problems for fear it will reflect on their jobs. It's natural for anyone, in or out of public relations, to want to put himself in the best possible light with the boss. Just as a quality control expert is understandably reluctant to confess that inferior goods have been slipping through, so the public relations man finds no joy in proving the existence of problems he presumably was hired to prevent.

This kind of thinking isn't by any means limited to the echelons below the presidency. Sometimes management itself simply doesn't want to know the facts; in others, it already knows them but doesn't want them pointed out.

## **Serious problem in employee morale**

A recent example is the case of a large financial institution which was formed by a merger of two smaller ones. The new combined management was aware of a serious problem in employee morale arising from a conviction on the part of former employees of one parent organization that they had been "taken over" and reduced to a "second-class citizen" status under amalgamation.

Some members of the new management, drawn from the organization which had "taken over" the other, strongly opposed plans for a survey to determine the nature and extent of this morale problem. Their argument: These "malcontents" had the "wrong" attitude. Since they had no business feeling as they did, better not give them a chance to complain.

Over the objections of this group, a survey was made. This established beyond question the nature and cause of the discontent. It also pointed the

way for an effective public relations program, involving mainly a new tone and attitude on the part of management, which in turn wrought a marked improvement in the attitudes of the so-called "malcontents."

While it came as no surprise to the people making the survey, management was puzzled to find that morale began to improve as soon as the study was undertaken. The reason was obvious. These people felt they had a valid complaint, but they were convinced that any effort to win a fair hearing from management was futile. When it developed that management actually was conducting a survey in which their views were being solicited, they immediately felt better. While only a sampling of employees were interviewed in the survey, word got around that those who had a grievance were getting a chance to air it as a preliminary to some sort of remedial action. Result: Weeks before the survey was completed and any action taken on the findings, people already were viewing the situation more optimistically, knowing their voices were finally being heard.

## **Forthright interpretation**

Until the day when someone devises a tasty, nourishing substitute for unpalatable truths, no public relations man can evade his duty to collect facts, pleasant and unpleasant, at each end of his two-way street and transmit them to the other, along with a forthright interpretation of their meaning.

This means finding out—fully, accurately, and as often as necessary—what the general public and each special public thinks of those aspects of a company's operations in which it has a financial stake or personal interest. It means interpreting this information for management without pulling punches, even when it hurts.

It means learning where the company really stands in the eyes of its employees, its stockholders, suppliers, distributors, dealers, and customers, its plant community neighbors, opinion leaders such as educators and the press, and every other special group on whose good will it depends for its existence.

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• *Public relations people continue to show increased interest in research techniques as they are applied to public relations problems. In the present article, Mr. Cook discusses some of these techniques as they may be applied to management problems in the area of public opinion.*

*Mr. Cook is a partner in the New York public relations firm of Pendray & Cook and has long been interested in research. The author is active in the Public Relations Society and is presently a vice president of the New York Chapter.*

It means keeping constantly aware that public relations can never be static, since it deals with the mercurial area of shifting attitudes. Situations and people change; new business conditions arise; opinions about an institution undergo constant alteration—for better or worse. This calls for unceasing vigilance by skilled public relations people to detect the first rumblings of trouble and plan a course to avoid it, to perceive the beginning of a long-term trend and take advantage of it from the start, and to seize the sudden opportunity which presents itself today, but if undetected or ignored is forever lost.

There are, of course, a number of ways by which an organization can learn where it stands with its publics at any given time.

#### Keeping eyes and ears open

The most obvious, but unfortunately the least reliable, is merely keeping one's eyes and ears open to detect all the signs, favorable and unfavorable, which evidence themselves by word of mouth or in writing in dozens of ways daily. A certain amount of griping is normal for all human beings. To the extent that this stays within "normal" limits, it merits only a continuing watchful eye. The trick, though, is to know what is "normal" in any given situation involving public attitudes, and to sense when something is developing which calls for action beyond routine public relations operations in this area.

One reason why mere watchfulness is the least reliable method of learning where you stand is that those close to a situation tend to lose perspective. In the absence of periodic checks or surveys which afford a benchmark against which to measure progress or deterioration in a given situation, it is hard to detect danger signs which appear slowly, sometimes barely perceptibly, over a long period, or to interpret these signs accurately even if detected.

The most definitive of these benchmarks, and the most reliable method of finding where an organization stands with its publics, is the full-scale survey of public attitudes by a competent research organization. The

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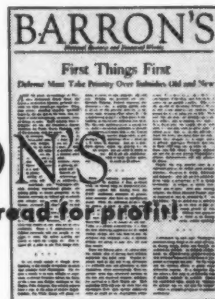
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techniques of determining and analyzing people's views of a company, its people, policies, and products, have come far in recent years.

#### Problems reduced

The specialists have reduced to a near-science the knotty problems of sampling, the phrasing of questions to elicit meaningful responses, and the interpretation of results for their most effective use in public relations.

Through questionnaires and interviews with members of each special public, carefully selected to yield a maximum amount of "projectable" data on each group's views, a research organization can sketch a detailed picture of people's attitudes. How effectively this information is applied as the basis of sound public relations activities is up to the management and public relations people of the company under study.

*Continued on Page 20*



Arthur M. Sargent

# WHY BELONG?

By Arthur M. Sargent

● Public relations men and women are often asked by employers, or by clients, "Why should I belong to my trade or professional association?" "What do I get in return for the dues I pay?" "Why organize at all?"

Public relations people are generally familiar with trade and professional associations, but for the sake of clarity let us establish that an asso-

ciation-type organization is made up of members of a trade or profession who have, as their stated objective, the desire to exchange information and search for solutions to their common problems by working together. The association furnishes a vehicle for accomplishing that which they could not do as individuals. The Public Relations Society of America, for example, is such an organization.

Why belong, indeed? To an association executive this is like asking management "Why do we produce and sell?" or a preacher "Why spread the Gospel?" To him the answer seems obvious, for it is his business to know, but it is fairly evident that there are many who understand it less clearly.

## Tangible benefits

The questions "Why should I belong?" "What do I get for my dues?" "Why do we organize?" might be answered in three ways—with the tangible benefits, the somewhat less tangible and often overlooked benefits, and finally, with something about the phi-

losophy of organized effort. Since the first two are well understood, for the most part, by public relations people they can be touched upon lightly, with a bit more attention devoted to the third.

The tangible or specific benefits include research and information on such activities as personnel selection and training, employee-employer relations, uniform costing and accounting, product marketing and service research, standardization and simplification of products and services, industry-wide product promotion, and the establishment of good public relations and dissemination of information. This last is something with which the public relations practitioner is thoroughly familiar, for it is in this area of activity that he undoubtedly furnishes leadership. Another and most important specific benefit is the activities of association representatives before legislative bodies. Still another is industry-wide group insurance plans resulting in premium reductions and consequent savings.

Among the less tangible benefits

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● ARTHUR M. SARGENT is the Executive Director of The California Society of Certified Public Accountants.

A native of New York, Mr. Sargent attended the Virginia Military Institute and Stanford University. Prior to accepting his present position in 1946, as the first full-time executive of the Society, Mr. Sargent spent several years in newspaper and chamber of commerce work. He was manager of both the Watsonville and Modesto Chambers of Commerce. He is immediate past president of the San Francisco Chapter of PRSA.



are over-all efforts of the organization to stabilize the profession or industry; opportunities for the development of leadership through association work; aid to the industry or profession in the expression of its public responsibilities; long-range planning, including consideration of industry-wide economics; arbitration; enforcement of standards of ethics or professional conduct; and industry-wide intracommunication efforts for improvements through conferences, meetings, bulletins, magazines, all designed for the exchange of ideas among those sharing common production, merchandising or service problems. It is surprising how many fail to recognize and participate in intracommunication efforts.

Certainly this is not a complete recital of all the benefits derived from the thousands of local, regional and national associations, but perhaps it is indicative.

### Basic philosophy

Now the third benefit, one which is often given too little consideration, concerns the basic philosophy of organizations. This philosophy strikes deeper at the heart of "Why pay dues?" "Why belong?" It is really the foundation, and all the other tangible and intangible benefits are superstructure that could not exist without this foundation.

"Why belong?" "Why pay dues?" "Why organize?"—what could be accomplished without organized effort and how could there be the organized effort so essential to the American way of doing business if individuals didn't "belong?" Organized effort through associations is, for business and professional people, a modern refinement. While trade associations in particular may often be made up of memberships representing businesses or large corporations, in the final analysis it is the individuals, who take part in their group's activities, who make for the success or failure of such associations. It might even be said that in today's society business and professions could hardly exist without association-type organized effort.

Here in America we worship at the shrine of freedom. We have great re-

spect for the dignity of the individual; but freedom and the dignity of the individual to do what? Perhaps it is, in part at least, to act within the orbit of organized effort.

Freedom of the individual does not suggest that one should pursue life as a hermit; freedom of the individual does not mean that by individual effort alone a man can move mountains, organize industry, administer government. To be sure there is no quarrel with the anti-social gentleman who prefers to exercise as a hermit his God-given right to freedom. But surely the rest of us would get very little done if we chose not to organize.

### Public esteem

The members of each association may well look to the place in public esteem its industry or profession holds in the business community and ask, "Could I, as an individual, or we as a business, have achieved our present position entirely on our own, or do we owe something to organized effort through the association?"

A member, you might say, takes from his association services in the form of dividends acquired from a trust, a trust created by the organized efforts of those who have gone before. If each should draw from this trust, selfishly, without thought of return, is it not likely that the trust would soon be dissipated and there would be little left for the future? Those who profess to be the high priests of organized efforts through associations have a responsibility to let members know that they must give even as they take from organized effort. At the same time, there is an equal responsibility for association executives not to be carried away in the spirit of the organization to the point where regimentation or over-organization sublimates individual effort. However, in a democracy where business operates as it does in this country, there is little danger that this will happen, at least for any great length of time. There are instances where organizations become autocratic, but they seldom prevail.

It is often in association activity that the seeds of individual effort and individual ideas are planted. The as-

• *Members of organized professional groups, such as the Public Relations Society, are often asked by non-members why they belong. "What do you get out of it?" is a common enough query. This article, dealing with some theoretical aspects of the matter, was prepared by an author, Mr. Sargent, who has for a good many years been concerned with the problems of organized groups.*

sociation might be likened to a planting ground where ideas will be given expression and growth when they have merit. Another way of expressing it is that the association is a catalytic agent which binds together the efforts of members and makes them strong and effective.

We cannot release human energy through organized effort in associations without expecting success and reward. No one is so naive as to expect that these returns will always be proportionate to the energies released, but certainly some good will result from organized efforts of men.

### Organized effort

Where would we be without organized effort? It begins in the home and continues in the church and the community and the government, in the school and in the activities of the business and profession. Perhaps here in America where business and industry have exhibited social consciousness greater than in any other part of the world, there must be some significant relationship to the reliance we have placed on organized associations.

No future is secure. Intelligent planning and ceaseless application and effort are requisites of progress which secure the future. This, of course, begins in the industry or profession itself, but can be made increasingly effective by industry-wide or professional cooperation in associations. Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Every man owes some part of his time to the building up of the industry or profession of which he is a part." The association furnishes an excellent opportunity for such a commitment to be fulfilled. ●

# Do We Really Know Where We Stand?

*Continued from Page 17*

## **Making a survey**

Another method of determining public attitudes is to bring in outside public relations counsel to make a survey. It is doubtful that any reputable counseling firm would claim to possess the experience or facilities to conduct surveys comparable in scope and accuracy with those of the opinion research specialist. However, this method does have the advantage that those making the study are able not only to interpret their findings in the light of practical public relations experience, but also to develop programs based upon the findings and, where desired, to conduct or supervise such programs.

Some counseling firms often undertake such studies on a "one-shot" or periodic basis. However, most prefer to conduct them only as part of a continuing counsel-client relationship, and will do so chiefly in the hope that the ties developed during the survey

will become permanent. Some decline entirely to handle "one-shot" assignments of any kind, or will accept them only in special instances, such as when they coincide with a lull in the activities of staff members normally assigned to other accounts.

Many counseling firms make it a practice to launch relatively comprehensive surveys or "audits" of public attitudes immediately upon beginning a relationship with a client, and to continue them at intervals to determine progress, review the effectiveness of current public relations programs or projects, and map the way for additional activities as the need develops.

Methods used by counseling firms in conducting such surveys vary considerably. Some work with or employ the professional opinion research organization to help them obtain the data upon which they base their study. A few firms, in addition, have developed techniques of their own for determining attitudes, along lines similar to those followed by opinion and motivation researchers.

## **Personal interview**

In a "field check" such as that mentioned earlier in connection with the chemical company, people from the counseling firm personally interview in depth a cross-section of each special public in a community or area to determine their views and draw out the reasons behind them. Sometimes a questionnaire form is used in these interviews. In other cases the questionnaire is avoided as tending to make the interviewees somewhat gunshy, since people are more reluctant to speak out when their words are being recorded.

In cases where the group to be interviewed is too large, too scattered, or too distant to be interviewed personally, mailed questionnaire forms

accompanied by an explanatory letter and self-addressed return envelope can be used. While this technique has value when the personal interview is impossible or impractical, it is decidedly less effective. For one thing, it permits no leeway to pursue individual variations in people's views. The skilled interviewer can sense, by a look, an inflection, or a pause on the part of the interviewee, when he has hit upon a point worth pursuing. The mailed questionnaire allows no such opportunity. Also, questionnaires sometimes tend to elicit a disproportionate number of responses from those who hold extreme views for or against a company, and thus fail to reflect accurately the whole spectrum of attitudes.

It is often desirable to employ a combination of the two methods of personal interviews and questionnaires to get as broad a picture of public attitudes as possible, keeping in mind that the questionnaire at best is a supplement to or a substitute for the interview.

Another way to determine public attitudes is, of course, through the company's own public relations department. The techniques of using interviews and questionnaires here are much the same as those employed by the counseling firm.

There are, however, certain pitfalls which should be borne in mind when a company undertakes to find out what people think about it.

## **The "company man"**

For one thing, those being questioned are more likely to air their views freely to one who is not connected directly with the organization under study than to one who is himself a "company man." Sometimes it's the interviewee's fear of retribution if he criticizes the company, particularly if he is an employee, supplier, or someone else whose livelihood depends upon it. The company man, asking an employee whether he has any fault to find with management's policies or practices, often will get the same polite but misleading reply as the hostess who asks a dinner guest whether the burned roast tastes good.

There are other advantages in hav-



—Drawing from HOLIDAY  
"Ad Man's Diary"

"You mean you haven't sent in my reservation yet for the 10th Annual Conference in Philadelphia, November 18-20?"

ing an opinion survey or audit made by an outside organization. The outsider brings an objectivity to pinpointing problems, analyzing their causes, and suggesting solutions which those in the company may find it hard or impossible to achieve. As in the case of the financial institution cited earlier, people who live with a problem tend to become so immersed in whether someone's attitude is "right" or "wrong," according to their own subjective viewpoint, that they sometimes are incapable of an impartial appraisal. Even if the company man has no personal axe to grind on a particular problem, he still is prone, as all of us are, to the previously cited loss of perspective on matters with which we are closely associated over a long period. We tend to condone the crack in the kitchen wall or the leaky faucet in our own homes for months because they are ours, and therefore somehow more forgivable than the same crack or leak in a neighbor's house.

Another advantage of having an outside firm make the survey is that it often is in a better position than an insider to call its shots as it sees them when management must be told unpleasant truths about its shortcomings from the standpoint of public relations.

#### Interpret accurately

Also, the outsider whose experience covers a variety of companies often is able to interpret the meaning of the survey's findings more accurately in the light of other situations with which he already has dealt.

Finally, rightly or wrongly, management often is more likely to heed the counsel and warnings of the independent observer, whose objectivity is beyond question, than of someone it thinks may have personal reasons for suggesting a particular project or course of action, especially if it's going to cost money.

Whatever method is used to learn where an organization stands in public opinion, though, the plain fact is that those responsible for its public relations have a solemn responsibility to keep traffic moving freely on both sides of our two-way street.



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## Books in Review

**PUBLIC RELATIONS IDEAS IN  
ACTION, By Allen H. Center.**  
McGraw-Hill, 1957.

Reviewed by John P. Rodgers, Jr.

● With the variety of books being published in the public relations and related fields, it is no surprise to find that another book in case-history style has been added to the growing reference shelf.

The book, not primarily for the benefit of the public relations counselor, gives the layman practical solutions to problems without resorting to radical innovations. To the average businessman, with no public relations background, or to the newly-elected director of public relations for a club or organization, it provides a wealth of useful and constructive ideas.

The author has incorporated into this book diverse programs executed in many areas. The scope of such an undertaking necessitated limiting the number of cases presented in each particular field.

Fifty case histories, from forty-nine different sources, are presented. Most of the contributors are public relations practitioners, either in individual business establishments or public relations firms. To supplement the histories, the author concludes each chapter with his analysis of the topic. ●

### Research—Continued

unknown connotations may kill sales, company reputation and prove ruinous to future growth.

#### "Rules of thumb"

Where can social science research be used? These have been but a few instances. The only limiting factors are imagination and a desire to know as much about a "thing," a person, a situation, a product, a name, as you possibly can. One of the best "rules



—Drawing from HOLIDAY  
"Ad Man's Diary"

"I knew I should have made him take me to the 10th Annual Conference in Philadelphia, November 18-20."

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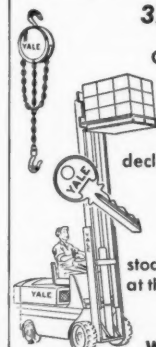
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of thumb" ever applied to public relations has been outlined by Daniel Yankelovich of Nowland & Company, and I quote him:

Social science research is properly used in public relations practice—

1. When determining the message best suited to meet your organization's objectives;
2. When finding out what points will make this message most believable and convincing;
3. When assessing the influence of different media on people;
4. When giving your public relations program a basis in fact, and providing you with proof of its factual character;
5. When assessing the effectiveness of an existing public relations program;
6. When defining your organization's public relations problems, and showing their relative importance and relationship to other organization problems. ●

## Writers—Continued

"Clichés that Clutter" and "The Headline is the Bait."

How many technical writers will stuffily write, "consideration had to be given to the factor of availability of fresh water supply," instead of simply stating, "they had to make sure there was enough fresh water available."

But what may be a convenient cornerstone for better technical writing and reporting is found in the booklet's "Ten Commandments for Technical Writing." These include: "Thou shalt exercise thy judgment as to whether a story is worth writing at all;" "Thou shalt know what thou art writing about;" "Thou shalt not substitute adjectives for facts;" "Thou shalt not show off thy technical vocabulary;" "Thou shalt not leave any unanswered questions in thy reader's mind;" "Thou shalt not turn essayist when thou art a reporter."

For public relations men as well as technical writers, these could be golden rules of writing. ●

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## The Scared Comedians

Continued from Page 6

that TV may have out public-relationsed itself.

### Read with wistfulness

Actually, though it is not a proper part of this essay, I think that stars' love lives have little effect on their public relations. *Confidential Magazine* is being sued for amounts roughly equivalent to the national debt by its victims, but embarrassing as its disclosures may be in private, their effect on the box office seems less than disastrous. I cherish a belief that most readers of this tripe read of the whims of their idols with more wistfulness than censure.

I claim to be a writer—primarily—rather than an advertising expert or a public relations man. I do not pretend to know much about the current debate between the advertising agencies and the public relations firms over who should make what decisions when.

What I think I do know is that the basic public relations decisions about the "Total Programming" on radio and TV in recent years have been made by the advertising agencies. And I think that this prevalence of advertising men in the policy area has often led to some lamentable results. To paraphrase Clemenceau, who said something to the effect that war is too important to be left to the generals, possibly radio and TV are too important as media of communication to be left to the advertising agencies. ●

### Intellect

"There are three classes of intellects: one which comprehends by itself; another which appreciates what others comprehend; and a third which neither comprehends by itself nor by the showing of others; the first is the most excellent, the second is good, the third is useless."

—Machiavelli



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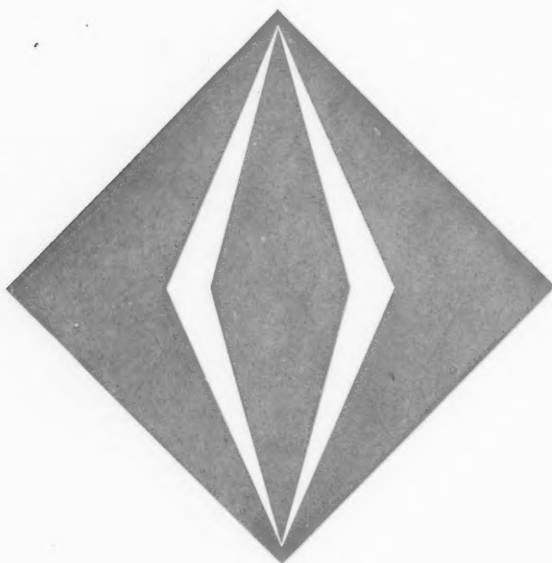
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